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The End of the European City?

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A city is basically a geographical unit, not a 'theoretical object' for sociological analysis – that was the conclusion of a profound critical appraisal of sociological concepts for the study of urban phenomena (Saunders 1981). In urban theory there are plenty attempts to create a theory of 'the urban' or of the urban structure. They all failed in the end, because they run into the dilemma of abstraction in order of to find common characteristics of cities in general, necessarily regarding them as universal formations. The most prominent approach in this tradition was developed by the 'Chicago-School', but also other generalising approaches have been dispersed predominantly by American scholars. Today we face the situation that concepts for urban analysis are dominated by views from US-America – despite the obvious fact, that spatial and social reality in European cities is far away of what we can read in this literature. In this paper I firstly will discuss some problems of abstract or universal approaches to urban development, secondly outline the theoretical construct of the 'European City', and finally present some doubts on the use of this concept today.

Max Weber's analysis of the 'occidental city', first published in the 20ies of the 20th century (see Weber 2000), today usually is seen as obsolete for contemporary urban studies, because the autonomous medieval city does not exist any more. For urban research two analytical concepts have been critical in the 20th century, which refrained from taking into account geographical peculiarities: the socio-ecological (Chicago-School) and the Marxist approach. Also the most recent creation of a new 'city type', the Global City concept, is conceptualized as a universal category. But there are now attempts to revitalise the notion resp. the category of the 'European City' – and I will refer to these in the end of this paper.

The first sociological analysis of the 'metropolis' stems from Georg Simmel (1903), who had been living in Berlin at the turn from the 19th to the 20th century. Robert Park, one of the founders of the Chicago-School has listened to lectures of Simmel in Berlin (see Lindner , and Louis Wirth has taken literally a lot from Simmel for his famous article on 'The 'Urban Way of Life' – without mentioning Simmel at all. In a very short sketch on the history of urban sociological theory (see for an extended discussion Häußermann/Siebel 2004) I'll try to make it understandable, why the notion of the 'European City' is discussed again today.

1. Simmel

Georg Simmel became the first 'urban sociologist' through his essay on 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903). He was interested in the culture of big cities, and in the effects of space. For him the big city represented the space of modernity - a notion that is understandable if you think of the sharp social and cultural differences between rural and urban areas at that time in the industrialized countries.

Very roughly summarized Simmel develops two concepts:

- a) He stated, that social relations are special (functional, segmented) in big cities, that urban life enables individualization, and that living in big cities has effects on behaviour (keeping distance to other urban dwellers) and on mentalities (a certain coolness, arrogance etc.). The city makes you rootless, but at the same time it is the space where you can be liberated from social control and traditional ties. The big city marked the transition from community to society.
- b) For Simmel the city is the space of the 'money economy' ("Geldwirtschaft"), social relations and exchanges are becoming more and more impersonal. The ongoing division of labour and competition in a limited space create economic and cultural differentiation, specialisation and innovation.

Both concepts are bound to the heterogeneity of actors and to the spatial density of interactions – to be different is awarded in an urban context, in contrast to rural areas, where adaption to homogenous local communities is demanded. The Urban is inresolvable connected to money economy, which means modernisation – capitalism

meant modernity. At the beginning of the 20th century 'modernity' was limited to big cities.

Simmel gave clue for the notion, that the three dimensions of 'the Urban' (heterogeneity, density and size) form a universal category for 'the City' – as later Louis Wirth has developed it. In Simmel's view there was nothing specific European in the emergence of modern urbanism.

2. Chicago School

The Chicago School tied in with Simmel's basic ideas and generalized and reified it: the definition of 'the urban' was verbalized as the simultaneity of heterogeneity, density and big size of a location, leaving aside the basic condition of the 'money economy'. The thinned definition, given by Wirth, was thought as universal: all cities should show similar cultures, social relations and spatial structures.

Adapting ecological theory the Chicago School transformed Simmel's 'money economy' into a 'natural' phenomenon: competition and 'struggle' were seen as the basic dynamic forces of urban development. The urban dynamic was conceived as the struggle between groups, which formed the basic social units of the city. The segregation of groups – ethnic, national, racial, social etc. – was conceived as the formation of 'natural areas'. So the city was seen as a 'mosaic of small worlds', as a balanced patchwork of communities in which the life of individuals was embedded. In this view, the urban communities cared for social control, individualization was seen as a danger, as the risk of desintegration – and not as a form of emancipation as Simmel had seen it.

The approach of the Chicago School became the dominating paradigm for urban research in the 40ies and 50ies. With this paradigm also the idea of the convergence of spatial structures and socio-economic developments of all big cities became popular. Because the ecological approach explained the urban structure predominantly by so-called natural forces, politics could be neglected totally. This provided a perfect fundament for the thesis of convergence between Eastern and Western cities, between US and Europe, between First and Third World cities. The socio-spatial structure of a city was theorized as the result of demographic and technological changes.

The theories of the Chicago-School have already been heavily criticized from a Marxist perspective (see f.e. Castells 1977, Gottdiener/Feagin 1988). In the early 70ies Brian Berry (1973), a geographer, had already made an attempt to introduce cultural differences in the analysis of urban development distinguishing between different paths of urbanisation in different parts of the world. He was furiously attacked by David Harvey (1975) for this, because Harvey saw all cities bound into a world system, in which each city, in the first or the third world, could be positioned.

3. Marxism

The Chicago approach was challenged in the late 60s by the revival of Marxist theories and analytical concepts. At the same time in Germany and Austria, in France and Italy, in the UK and the USA in all social scientific disciplines Marxist concepts have been revitalized, and in urban studies the ecological approach was criticized as 'politic-free' and ahistoric. Urban policies in the context of the political-economic approach have been analyzed mainly as a result of economic trends. The power structure was given by the capitalist economic system. So in 'New Urban Sociology' again a universal model of urban development, now based on economic analysis had been created, valid only for capitalist societies - in many cases not very distant from the ecological theory. The Marxist theory is an approach to analyze capitalist structures (societies). So it was clear from the beginning, that socialist cities could not be analyzed with this theoretical instruments – actually there was given little attention to the cities in the so-called socialist countries. Socialist cities didn't play a role in the 'New Urban Sociology'. In Marxist perspective the city has been conceived as the place of collective consumption – and the struggle for good infrastructures was seen as part of the class-struggle, which had its center in the sphere of production.

A more recent development of the historic-materialist approach was the regulationist school, in which politics and economy are bound together in the concept of Fordism, which means a historic compromise between capital, the state and labour in favour of a growth policy. This theoretical concept allowed bringing in politics, and to analyze policies and changes at the local level as actions of the local state. Political economic

analysis provided the possibility, to distinguish between developed and 'underdeveloped' countries and cities, and to give attention to political power in urban analysis (Walton 1993).

This theory was not conceived as universal as the ecological approach was, but for the capitalist world it basically emanated from similar patterns of urban development or urban structures – dependent on the stage of economic development. A certain economic determinism or functionalism often could be observed in the 'New Urban Sociology'-literature.

4. The Global City

A prominent contemporary concept for urban studies is that of the 'Global City' – based on the idea of a 'world city', that was developed about 20 years ago by Friedman and Wolff (1982). The phrase 'Global City' – coined by Saskia Sassen (1991) - became popular, and more and more is used as a concept that should help us to understand the urban changes relating to the globalization of culture and the economy. The basic message was: the globalisation of the economy creates a new type of cities, the Global City, which serve as ground stations for global economic actions, as nodes in global networks, as places of control of global flows. This is basically a economic geographic categorization. But the 'Global City'-binds certain social consequences to this type of cities: they should be marked by a concentration of high level service functions, by spatial fragmentation, and by social polarisation. They are 'dual cities': split into a small world of globally related activities on the one side, and into a growing number of very badly paid slave-like workers on the other side, who produce the amenities for the needs of the new service sector elite.

There are serious critics especially about the proposition, that the 'Global City' is a universal urban type – regardless of the national context. Critics say, that there is no direct link between the Global and the Local, and that the social consequences, Sassen has stated as typical for Global Cities, are either not seen everywhere, or that they are consequences of processes which are not necessarily linked to this city type. Prétéceille and Hamnett have shown, that polarisation of income does not take place in Paris and

London – two of the so called Global Cities. Instead of dualisation they find a growing difference of earnings: a strong growth of highly qualified professional service jobs with high earnings, and a lower growth of the income level in the lower paid jobs – but still a growth. All income groups in these two cities are moving upwards, so all employed are earning more. The poor and the low-income-groups seem to be protected better than the Global City thesis would suggest. The model for a Global City was New York – and New York may be the only Global City in the sense of the ‘Global City’-concept.

Cities which perform as nodes in the global networks are not forming one new type with respect to the social structure, rather they are also different – dependent on the national context, on local traditions, and on the position cities have as political units or as political subjects (compare Lehto 2000). It seems it is not by chance, that you find these differences between New York on the one side, and Paris and London on the other. This brings us to the idea of a specific European tradition, of the model of a 'European City'.

5. Max Weber and the European City

The idea to define the European City in comparison to f.e. the Oriental City was developed by Max Weber. He was not an urban theoretician, but Weber was interested in why the European cities had become the birthplace of capitalism in medieval times – whereas in cities in other continents no such development could be observed. As the most relevant characteristics, which make the difference, he stated the following four:

- the market function with an autonomous trade police;
- autonomous legislation and jurisdiction;
- the character of an association the city had – it was not just a place, it was a social unit;
- political autonomy, self-administration, and self-determination.

"A special 'status as citizen' (Bürgerstand) as ... a medium of status privileges was the characteristic of the city in the political sense" (Max Weber). This was never the case in

China, India or in Japan. The inhabitants of the European cities, in fact of central European cities, established a formal community, a fraternity (“schwurgemeinschaftliche Verbrüderung”) by swear, a conjuratio. The fraternity served for protection of the property, only landowners formed this fraternity. They represented the interests of the urban citizens (“Stadtbürger”). In the beginning they formed a temporary association, but later on a permanent organization. The big success of the urban economy was closely related to the self-government of the cities, and the citizens had to get involved into urban (local) affairs.

The city in Max Weber's concept is not a physical structure, but a political association. He does not talk about consequences of space, but on the consequences of a distinct social and political institution, the core of which was the self-administering urban “Bürgertum”, the urban civil society. The city is conceived as a distinct society – in the same way as a state. This is the base of the fact, that in Europe you found a civilisation with the sharpest polarity between the city and the countryside. Up to the beginning of modernity the boarder between the urban and rural world was marked through walls, and these walls formed the boarder between different societies. This was only so in Europe.

Because of these characteristics of cities, by which they distinguished themselves sharply from the surrounding feudal countryside, inside of the walls that economic and political dynamism could develop, which became the foundation of the occidental modernity. In the city one was free from peonage, that denied most parts of the rural population the existence as a responsible human being. Just the belonging to the urban population meant an incredible social upwards mobility compared to the rural population. The cities were the places of social and cultural innovation. This progress in civilization made the European cities to a symbol of modernization – as long as they could act as autonomous corporate actors. With the incorporation of the autonomous cities into the territorial states, havin taken place under absolutism, they lost their special legal status, the citizens of the cities became citizens of the states. But the cities continued to be the centers of cultural and economic innovations.

The end of the cities as autonomous units initiated the declining significance of Max Weber's analysis. As from now the cities were interwoven with the national economy and the national society, they did not form a special society any more – and so the model of the European city lost relevance. But still there are obvious indicators of big differences between European cities and big cities elsewhere: the physical structure is distinct as the political system and social coherence as well. Is a model of 'the European City' still alive?

6. The European City today

a. The social organisation of the European City

Today the ‚citoyen‘ (‘‘Stadtbürger’’) is a mythic subject in the debate about the urban future, because he played a crucial role for the development of the European urban culture. His economic and political energies are seen as most important ingredients of the social capital of the cities still today. The historic role of the “Stadtbürger” is thought of as follows: The owners of the buildings in a city were identical with the users: on street level you found the shops, and in the upper floors the offices and the living-rooms – this formed a social and economic unit on a small parcel of land. Economic success and social integration were closely related to the parcel of land in the city. But with industrialization a fundamental change of the social structure and of the social organization of the city started. With industrialization a ‚big equalizer‘ seemed to have overcome the cities – and this was the end of the bourgeois city. But the profile of the European City can still be recognized if it is compared to the U.S., where the forming and the growth of cities did not start until industrialization.

b. The social organisation of the American City

The American city was the place of a radical modernity, its spatial and social development has been subject to the dictate of the market. The use of land followed exclusively the demand of private investors, and the value of a place is determined alone by the market. The low regulated development leads to a sharp segregation of the different groups of the population by income, status and ethnicity. The performance of

neighbourhoods is predominantly dependent on economic cycles. Local traditions, social concerns or respect to an urban culture do not play a significant role. The city center is not a place of identification with, but is a ,central business district‘ (CBD), in which culture and housing do not play a significant role¹. In the American city usually the tenement houses are owned by landlords living outside of the city, who are not interested in ,the city‘ as a social affair, but predominantly - if not only - in the gains they could make out of the properties. The problem of ,absentee ownership‘ as a cause for the decline of inner-city neighbourhoods is well-known.

c. The heritage of the European City in the 19th and 20th century

In Europe already in the second half of the 19. century – supported by remarkable parts of the enlightened bourgeoisie – a broad opposition has been formed against a market-led urban development, which was seen as responsible for the deep social contradictions and for the inhuman living conditions of the lower classes in the cities. Even Friedrich Engels‘ report on Manchester can be seen as a part of bourgeois concern over the antisocial effects of the urban environment. Whereas through the bourgeois revolutions liberal principles have been introduced in the formation of the urban environment and in the provision of housing, and whereas the local parliaments were dominated by an institutionalized majority of landlords, in the European cities an urban regime has been established in which the particular economic interests were forced to find compromises with social responsibilities and the interests of the city as a whole (they set good examples in health politics, in the slow improvement of housing, and in anti-poverty-initiatives, at least in caring for the poor). This can be seen as the creation of an urban regime, that felt responsible for ,the city‘ in all European countries.

So the model of a “moderate modernity” (Kaelble 2000) has been created, based on the strong influence of the public administration on urban development, which can be characterized by the following:

¹ This has changed to a certain extent in the postmodern period, when culture itself became more and more a commodity and an object of business.

- Public property of land has been collected and accumulated, which enabled the cities to play an important role in the decisions on the use-structure of the urban area, and which gave them the opportunity to plan the urban structure in a long-term perspective.
- After initial negative experiences with private owners the infrastructure for water- and energy-provision and the transport system was organized as a public affair. This 'municipal socialism' was effective and brought gains for the public budget, and it provided an often perfect infrastructure for the big cities.
- Parallel to this growing influence on urban development by economic activities the legal instruments for the planning of the physical structure have been created. Since the last third of the 19th century the local governments gained growing influence in the spatial pattern of the cities. The laws for land use control and development schemes have been developed at the local level, and the regulation of construction and uses became stronger in the 20th century, when the states took over and unified the legal regulations for urban development.
- Parallel in most European states a more or less strong welfare state has been developed, by which the poverty of the masses in the cities was challenged, and a growing number of inhabitants was bewared of becoming homeless because of economic need. In all states, in which the take-off of industrialization had taken place, and in which the proletarian masses were attracted by the rapidly growing cities, approaches to different forms of 'social housing' have been developed, i.e. they started with the creation of a segment of housing provision, in which the quality of housing was not directly dependent from the economic power of the tenants. Steps into a decommodification of housing have been undertaken in the industrializing European states and cities, but not in the U.S. (Harloe 1995). By this in the European cities those slums and Ghettos could be avoided which are so typical for American cities. Their first manifestations, described by Friedrichs Engels, could be deconstructed in the run of the 20th century, and the creation of more and new ones has been hindered by the growing effectivity of national and local social policies since the late 19th century. Also the state-financed urban

renewal programmes, which caused physical renovation of the high dense inner-city neighbourhood with an insufficient physical quality, a poor population living in. Despite of the social consequences of the urban renewal programmes (the relocation of the working class resp. the underclasses), it was never doubted that ,the city‘ as a whole should feel responsible for the living-conditions in the inner city areas, and that these quarters should not be determined for a mere capitalist restructuring.

As a consequence of these historical developments still today the core of the model of a European City is the public influence on urban development, and the perception of the city as a collective identity – what becomes very clear, if you compare f.e. the structure and the development of marginalized neighbourhoods in American and European cities (see Wacquant) This means that there exist remarkable differences in the overall making of the cities (see Strom 2001, 224-239), and in the degree of social integration as well. The welfare state systems (Esping-Andersen 1990) as well as the urban policies embedded therein mark sharp difference between cities, which are only a setting for market-exchanges and those, which have more command on their social and spatial development (Lehto 2000).

7. Americanization and Alternatives

Whereas the social organization of the European city does not play a significant role in the contemporary debates on urban development in Europe, the image and the physical structure of the European City experience a renaissance (see Siebel 2004). Together with the decline of social housing in most European states and with the financial squeeze of municipalities the influence of public decisions on the socio-spatial organization of the cities has been diminishing dramatically. The privatization of housing, the selling of public land, the selling of public enterprises, the commodification of public and social services – we can observe these policies everywhere. There is tendency to the dissolution of the city as a public good.

The ,Americanization‘ of the European City seems to be under way, and this would mean the convergence to the market-led organization of the cities. Perversely at the same time ,New Urbanism‘, a nostalgic, European urban forms simulating urban design, propagandates the image of the European City as a postmodern orientation - but

without any cultural or social analogy to the traditional European City. This 'rediscovery' of the European City is just a fake (Siebel 2004).

But we also find the proclamation of a new future for the model of the 'European City' by urban sociologists, who appeal to Max Weber as well as to the special traditions of European cities and to the historic and geographical peculiarities of the European urban system. Arnaldo Bagnasco and Patrick Le Galès (2000) argue spunkily for a new notion of the European City and for new analytical perspectives in contrast to American urban sociology. Their basic argument is that the declining significance of the nation-states (as a consequence of globalization and Europeanization) is incidental for a 'power vacuum', which could give new opportunities for local or regional action. For them this is not only a thesis, and not a question: Their 'analytical standpoint' is, that "cities have become political and economic actors in Europe" (p. 5). "Cities are clearly again becoming actors, ... they create their own identities. ... Cities remain significant tiers of social and political organisation. ... "Cities ... constitute separate units as actors" (p. 6). They state, a "new climate of doubt and uncertainty for the higher authorities: (this constitutes) a new historical interlude ... (and) the room for manoeuvre is growing for cities" (p. 7) – and moreover: "the classical model of the medieval European city remains alive and well." (p. 10). "It is not the Max Weber integrated medieval city, but it counts for something ... the city has meaning" (p. 15). They are in favour of a renaissance of Regionalism, what means "resistance of traditional societies to market penetration" (17). The argument has been more elaborated in Le Galès' recent book (2002).

The basic argument for this new notion is that a) the European urban system is different from the American (more medium-sized cities, less metropolises), b) that the appreciation of an urban culture never has finished, and c) that cities remain strongly regulated.

We can basically agree to that, but some question remains open: what is the basis for a local identity or for the formation of the city as a social resp. political subject? Part of the answer should be, how the impact of globalisation on the urban fabric is perceived: does it split the cities, separate globally linked parts of the city from the local networks,

which become more and more dependent and marginalised? Or is there a close relation between global and local networks, which is necessary for global action, as global actors must be embedded in local networks (and cultures)? If the second is true, the question still remains, whether this is a basis for the formation of a political subject in the sense, that includes redistributive capacity. While the conditions for local action are converging more and more by the internationalization of economic relations, and by the enormous power, international players have achieved over the last two decades, we can observe remarkable differences in local responses to these tendencies.

Historic differences, coherent development strategies, the public provision of the infrastructure, and the still existing identity of cities, make European cities distinct from the urban reality in the United States. Form, culture, policies and the living-conditions of European cities legitimate the demand for a new orientation in urban theory, that is able to take into account these differences.

8. Conclusion

The European City was a creation of the owners of the land, who at the same time formed the economic and cultural forces of urban development. They conceived themselves as a distinct class, and this social class acted on the basis of political autonomy. This class dominated the cities, and it was a revolutionary force by defending its autonomy. This was the contribution of the European City to the development of modern civilisation.

Along with the process of democratisation in the late 19th century and early 20th century the dominating role has been taken over by the state resp. by the elected local administrators. They represented somewhat what is called 'Gemeinwohl' in German – a 'common interest', not only the specific interests of one specific class, but the common interest of an imagined modern city.

The professionalisation of urban planning, and the concept of 'the modern city' during the 20th century very often led to the destruction of the historic heritage of the European cities. The opposition against this destruction came at first from the remaining tradition

of the bourgeoisie – represented today by the diminishing bourgeois classes, and the new middle-classes, which have developed an new taste for urban life.

Today the opposition against the market-lead model seems to be weaker than in any time before. The political support for collective institutions is undermined by individualization and by neoliberal hegemony. The idea of the regeneration or revitalisation of the European City is based upon the notion of a lively regional or local identity, which spends energy for the struggle against the uniforming forces of globalisation. That this idea is not helpless idealistic or naive, can only be justified by the reality of the traditional interventionist role of the local authorities in urban history. Can this be revitalized? This hope is the legacy of the European City.

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